



NEWS RELEASE

EUROPE REGIONAL MEDICAL COMMAND

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Spring is – aachoo! – here!

Europe Regional Medical Command Public Affairs Office

It's in your hair, on your skin, up your nose, and in your eyes – pollen – Mother Nature's perverse way of announcing spring.

Pollen, that nasty invisible irritant to our immune system that causes symptoms of seasonal allergies.

What are seasonal allergies?

“These are allergic problems caused primarily by exposure to pollens that are worse when certain plants are blooming,” said Dr. (Lt. Col.) Stephen N. Marks, allergist, Landstuhl Regional Medical Center.

Folks living in Germany can blame their itchy, watery eyes, and chronic sniffing on a few bad seeds and trees.

“Right now, trees are the dominant pollinators – alder and birches are the big ones for this moment in Germany, and grasses are not far behind,” said Marks.

The pollination process and its affect on allergy sufferers rotates from season to season.

“In general trees pollinate in early spring and into the summer; grasses in late spring and through the summer; and weeds from summer into the fall,” explained Marks. “In a climate like Germany seasonal allergies tend to occur during the spring, summer and fall. After the first good frost those pollens are inactivated by freezing, so they no longer cause symptoms,” said Marks.

An allergy diagnosis is made based on a person's physical symptoms.

“Typical symptoms of seasonal allergies are sneezing, runny nose, itchy watery eyes, stuffy nose and sometimes wheezing, chest tightness or cough,” said Marks.

“These symptoms can be very severe, especially affecting the eyes. That seems to be the hardest area to get under control,” he said. “It interferes with a person’s ability to function. You need your eyes for almost everything we do in our society and when they are itchy and uncomfortable, it can affect our daily lives.”

Most allergy symptoms can be relieved by using an over-the-counter antihistamine. Over-the-counter eye drops with an antihistamine ingredient relieve itchy, watery eye problems.

However, Marks cautions against long-term use of over-the-counter eye drops.

“The downside to over-the-counter eye drops is that they contain a decongestant,” he said. “You should not use these eye drops for an extended period of time as this can make the redness worse.”

There are prescription medications available that offer relief of allergy symptoms. Your healthcare provider can prescribe antihistamines that do not cause drowsiness.

Take care when using certain over-the-counter allergy relief medications on a daily basis.

“I would caution people to avoid excessive use of over-the-counter decongestant nasal sprays,” said Marks. “If these medicines are used too long, you can develop a rebound nasal congestion. This results in a requirement to use that medicine everyday just to be able breathe through your nose.”

Doctors can also prescribe a topical nasal spray. An anti-inflammatory nasal spray is even more effective than oral anti-histamines at reducing the nasal symptoms.

Marks says the time to visit your healthcare provider is when the allergies are not adequately controlled with medications.

“Patients should be referred to an allergist if they have, at a minimum, been taking a corticosteroid nasal spray everyday and a daily anti-histamine for at least six weeks, plus or minus eye drops, and their symptoms are not improving,” explained Marks. “A referral to an allergist for skin testing and allergy evaluation is the recommended next step.”

Patients referred for an evaluation and skin testing must stop taking antihistamines ten days prior to skin-testing; otherwise, the anti-histamine blocks the response in the skin and the results are not reliable.

“Prescribed allergy shots may be the best treatment option for some patient’s allergies,” said Marks. “These shots offer the best treatment for allergies because they don’t just treat the symptoms; they change the immune system so that the person’s immune system does not recognize these things as allergy-causing.”

Allergy shots are not a quick-relief treatment for allergy sufferers, and a certain amount of risk is involved.

“Receiving allergy shots is a long-term treatment course of three to five years and carries a significant risk,” said Marks. “The risk is the possibility of having an allergic reaction to the shot itself. Those allergic reactions can happen at any time and due to this risk, the shots are required to be given at a clinic. Patients have to wait for a minimum of 30 minutes after each injection.”

Don't let seasonal allergies prevent you from enjoying being outside. With allergy medication you can enjoy the great outdoors. Keep in mind that if you don't see an improvement in symptoms within a few weeks of using over-the-counter medication it is suggested you schedule an appointment with your health care provider for further evaluation.